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HEALTH CARE

White House abruptly cancels meeting with vaping advocates

By **DANIEL LIPPMAN** and **DAN DIAMOND** | 09/19/2019 04:11 PM EDT | Updated 09/19/2019 06:07 PM EDT

The White House abruptly organized — and then quickly canceled — a meeting Thursday with frustrated conservative policy leaders, to try to tamp down anger about a sweeping vaping ban that's inflamed the Trump administration's traditional allies, four individuals with knowledge of the meeting told POLITICO.

President Donald Trump last week announced a ban on flavored e-cigarettes, a policy that officials portrayed as a response to an epidemic of teen vaping amid a potentially unrelated outbreak of a mysterious vaping-related disease that's stricken 530 and killed seven people.

While public health officials largely cheered Trump's crackdown, conservatives have sought to convince the White House that the president's ban is a federal overreach that will anger millions of adult vapers, including as many as 2.55 million in 12 swing states. In the past week, the Wall Street Journal editorial board has blasted "the frenzy against e-cigarettes" and multiple conservatives have taken aim at Trump's ban in high-profile op-eds.

"A ban on flavored e-cigarettes could cost Trump a second term," Paul Blair of Americans for Tax Reform argued in a Washington Examiner op-ed last week. The "well-organized vaping constituency could swing the outcome of the Electoral College one way or the other."

The Trump administration on Wednesday morning invited outside conservatives to a meeting with senior officials, framed to hear out their concerns. But by Thursday morning, the meeting with conservative groups was called off, and invitees told POLITICO that they've felt sidelined through a rapidly evolving debate — and that it's misrepresented their position.

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"I think that the White House didn't necessarily have an accurate feel for where conservative groups were at on this," said Blair, who was invited to the meeting and has shared concerns out more about the cookies we use.

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about the vaping strategy with administration officials. “I think there’s a little bit of chaos over at the White House given how strong the pushback has been.”

“They should do research before implementing nationwide policies,” said Michelle Minton, a senior fellow at the Competitive Enterprise Institute, who was also invited. “I would encourage them to continue this outreach and continue to look into this issue before they do anything.”

A White House official said the meeting was canceled due to a scheduling conflict and is expected to be rescheduled. The official noted that Trump has directed the FDA to take action to protect the public health of children. Trump tweeted last week, “While I like the Vaping alternative to Cigarettes, we need to make sure this alternative is SAFE for ALL! Let’s get counterfeits off the market, and keep young children from Vaping!”

Bloomberg first reported the meeting’s cancellation.

Beyond Thursday’s canceled meeting, the Trump administration has sought to reassure vaping advocates and other potential critics by deploying top health officials — including Surgeon General Jerome Adams — to listen to their concerns over the past week, said two individuals with knowledge of the strategy. An HHS spokesperson said Adams had a number of calls with interested parties, as is common with policy rollouts. “Those calls have been with leading health care organizations and associations that seek to advance public health and highlight the dangers tobacco products pose for our youth,” the spokesperson said.

The vaping ban has increasingly pitted Trump’s advisers in the White House — worried about alienating activists and allies who are mobilizing around the issue — against public health officials like Adams and former FDA Commissioner Scott Gottlieb, who took a hard line against teen use of e-cigarettes before stepping down in April, according to three people with knowledge of the disputes.

That fight accelerated earlier this year as health officials sought new restrictions on vaping. A February letter — signed by prominent conservatives like Grover Norquist and Ken Cuccinelli, who was subsequently tapped to serve as a top immigration adviser to the president — warned that any crackdown on e-cigarettes would hurt small businesses and hinder adults’ efforts to quit traditional cigarettes. Adams also has clashed online with conservatives who say Trump’s e-cigarette strategy goes too far.

Meanwhile, vaping advocates and lobbyists, led by the Vapor Technology Association, swarmed Capitol Hill on Wednesday to push back against Trump’s ban and possible

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congressional legislation. The group's representatives also met with White House officials, said one individual with knowledge of the meeting. The association didn't respond to questions about the meeting.

The shared goal of conservatives and vaping advocates: To weaken or reverse Trump's broad ban, which still needs to navigate a regulatory thicket ahead of the 2020 election.

"I think if the proposal goes out, and flavors are pulled from the market, you would see a dramatic adverse economic impact," said Tony Abboud, the head of the Vapor Technology Association. "I certainly hope that will be taken into account when you have 14,000 small business owners who would be virtually eliminated overnight."

Juul, the dominant e-cigarette manufacturer, has avoided directly lobbying the White House since Trump's ban was announced, said an official with knowledge of the company's strategy, as it weighs short-term trade-offs versus long-term strategy.

"The company fully supports the flavor part of the ban," said the official, adding that the rise in teen vaping has created public health concerns and puts the entire industry at risk. But Juul is still deciding its position on Trump's call to limit menthol e-cigarettes, because menthol is available in combustible cigarettes, the official added.

Sarah Oweremohle contributed to this report.

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